Map, text and image
The mentality of enlightened conquerors: a new look at the Description de l'Egypte

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This paper takes a new look at the Description de l'Egypte in the light of the theses of Said, Mitchell and Bruno Latour on intellectual conquest. It argues that in addition to being the product of an historically remarkable scientific exploration, the Description was a sophisticated and purposive interpretation of Egypt which reflects as much about the participants' conception of themselves as about Egypt. The Description has been underestimated by historians in at least two ways: its power as a tool of imperial aggression through its attempts to 'reorient' the country economically and politically and through 'representation' has not been explored; and the considerable ideological coherence of the work has been missed by scholars interested in only one or a small selection of fields represented in the Description. A comprehensive look at map, image and text reveal a construction of Egypt designed to replace Egypt itself. The Description creates the Egypt that could be claimed and taken home and mathematically and rigorously interpreted in the silence of French libraries, laboratories and museums without the difficult complications associated with colonialism, subject peoples and the bizarries of other cultures.

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Introduction: mapping the Enlightenment world view and the invention of Egypt

Since the publication of Harley's 'Deconstructing the map'¹ it has become trendy to describe maps as misrepresentations, as complex tissues of lies and persuasion. Medieval maps, propaganda maps and even pictorial road maps have been described as exemplary of this nature.² It takes little time in front of a topographic map, however, to realize that maps are neither lies nor the truth. Like most human creations, they are purposive interpretations of, and commentaries on, the human and physical world. What is interesting about these interpretations is not their distance from reality, that they are errors or distortions — for how can we judge the distance and what would its measurement tell us? — but that they are systematic. Inextricably part of a larger whole (a body of literature, a system of spatial understanding and a system of social organization), they are also the most powerful tools of spatial analysis ever developed. Systematic, spatial and analytic then, they are also descriptive. Descriptive, not only of the world that they seek to portray but of the system from which they emanate.

This paper will explore an early topographic map and its relationship to the texts of which it formed a part, to the intellectual tradition from which it emanated and which it informed and to the systems of spatial understanding and social organization which constituted its reason for existence. The focus here will be on the Description de l'Egypte and, in
particular, on the topographic maps which, it is argued, were an integral part of that work. Indeed, not only are they to be understood as inseparable from the rest of the text and plates but through their close tie to key Enlightenment ideals and their suitability to the business of imperial conquest, they were the intellectual focus of the Description. As such, they strongly influenced the research, writing and artwork undertaken for the Description. The mapping, carried out for the Description in Egypt during the Napoleonic conquest of that country was inextricably tied to imperial conquest, both in terms of the ‘on the ground problems’, which helped to shape the questions the mapping sought to resolve, and in terms of its conscious and unconscious representation of Egypt. As a result the mapping of Egypt, here used to include the entire Description, cannot be taken at face value or used uncritically. In fact, much of its interest and passion lies precisely in the areas of interpretation hidden below the surface.

This paper, then, argues that both topographic mapping and the scientific exploration behind the Description de l’Egypte were products of the ‘Enlightenment Project’ and reflected its values. Further, that a close study of the cartography which dominates the Description will reveal both the coherence of the Description and the powerful ideological message carried by this work which formed one of the foundations of modern Egyptology and was also one of the models for Western ‘scientific’ imperialism.

What, then, is meant by the ‘Enlightenment Project’, and what are the essentials of the ideology it describes? Habermas and Harvey argue that the supporters of the Enlightenment Project saw themselves as engaged in a process of creative destruction involving a disenchantment with the world, the dissolution of myths and the substitution of these myths with knowledge derived from facts which could be seen to be true. An important part of this disenchantment involved the rejection of traditions based on the conventions and virtues of everyday life in favour of rationally worked out and universally applicable administrative and legal bureaucratic solutions. As I will discuss below, the ideal of a universal system can be seen to have served as a principal intellectual justification for the Napoleonic conquests and, by extension and insofar as this conquest was in quest of an intellectual unity, as a justification of the scientific conquest of Egypt.

The emphasis on facts which could be seen to be true is of primary importance in understanding the empirical spirit of the Enlightenment. Truth could be demonstrated using physical demonstration, text, map or image. Horkheimer and Adorno, however, stress the extraordinary weight carried by number in Enlightenment thought:

To the Enlightenment, that which [did not] reduce to numbers, . . . [became] illusion . . . Enlightenment . . . put aside the classic requirement of thinking about thought . . . Mathematical procedure became, so to speak, the ritual of thinking. In spite of the axiomatic self-restriction, it [established] itself as necessary and objective: it [turned] thought into a thing, an instrument . . .

This emphasis on number and the instrumentality of knowledge has a strong association with cartography as mapping assigns a position to all places and objects. That position can be expressed numerically. In addition, the whole procedure of mapping is closely associated with number and measurement through the process of terrain measurement. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the Enlightenment preoccupation with such facts which could be seen to be true had negative implications:

What is abandoned is the whole claim and approach of knowledge: to comprehend the given as such: not merely to determine the abstract spatio-temporal relations of the facts which allow them just to be grasped. ... Mathematical formalism ... whose medium is number, the most abstract form of the immediate, ... holds thinking firmly to mere immediacy. Factuality wins the day; cognition is restricted to its repetition; and thought becomes mere tautology.

The focus, then, on numbers and abstract spatio-temporal relations (best captured by maps) might appear to lead to knowledge but could provide only uncritical repetition of apparent factuality.

Horkheimer and Adorno, and Harvey also emphasize the link between domination and representation. They argue that for Enlightenment thinkers it was self-evident that there was only one possible answer to any question. Consequently, they shared the conviction that the world could be controlled and rationally ordered if it could be pictured and represented correctly. That is, it could be controlled if the representation succeeded in capturing the eternal and immutable in the midst of the chaos and ephemeral. It was also extremely important to be able to associate oneself with the eternal and immutable. When this idea is combined with Habermas’ observation that the executors of the Enlightenment Project sought to preserve a
secret tie to the ‘classical’, it has particular relevance to the French invasion of Egypt. One of the principal aims of the expedition, and particularly of the Description de l’Egypte, was the association of France and French culture with ancient Egypt. Behind this association was the suggestion that cultural superiority, which gave France the rights of conquest, was derived from a sort of passage of reason and science (of which maps and mapping were the very embodiment) from its birthplace in Egypt, to the Greco-Romans, to its full realization in Europe and its return to its birthplace by France. The eternal and the immutable lay in both what was represented (the monuments of ancient Egypt) and in the very scientific mode of representation.

Although Enlightenment thinkers were concerned to dissolve myths linking the modern age to tradition and traditionalism, Enlightenment thought was equally reliant on myth both to obscure and to enlighten. Myth, as Horkheimer and Adorno note, was useful in avoiding the considerable and, in some cases, the impossible, labour of conceptualization. Perhaps the primary myth of the Enlightenment, which may also be the one most tenaciously held onto today, was the myth of progress: the myth that ‘civilization’ is progressing to a culmination and the point closest to that culmination is represented by ‘us’. This concept of progress lent a certain messianism to the contact of Europeans with non-Europeans and led directly, among a whole series of other important distortions, to the concept of the hierarchy of cultures. Maps and mapping played an important role in the elaboration and substantiation of that myth. Historians of cartography have recently observed that if knowledge is power, then maps are a particularly instrumental form of power. Maps, however, are also technology and technology has frequently been used as a rationale for conquest and dominance in the context of ‘development’, colonialism and discussions of the relative advancement of cultures. The mapping and technological transformation of Egypt was a primary rationale for the conquest – and certainly for the study – of that country. However, as Horkheimer and Adorno so eloquently expressed the relationship between technology, economy and society:

... the basis on which technology acquires power over society is the power of those whose economic hold over society is the greatest. A technological rationale is the rationale of dominance itself.

Ideology in the Description de l’Egypte

The Description de l’Egypte is one of the most appealing and remarkable published works ever to have come out of a European imperial venture. It comprised 10 volumes of text (including the historical Préface), 885 plates (a small number hand-coloured); a three-sheet geographic map; and a 47-sheet topographic map of the country. It was the product of the work of a collaborative research team directed largely by top military figures or by members of the Institut de France in conjunction with French military authorities. Much of the work contained in these volumes is of remarkably high quality. The research undertaken, in most cases at the frontiers of each of these endeavours, included: archaeology; landscape description; historical astronomy and astrology; geodesy; cartography; mineralogy; botany; zoology; historical hydrology, hydrology and hydrological engineering; urban mapping and analysis; mensuration; agronomy; the analysis of small-scale industrial and commercial techniques; historical geography; musicology; history; public administration; historical toponymy; historical demography and demography; chemistry; optics; medicine; climatology; anthropology; and pedology. The venture was, in and of itself, remarkable as nowhere in France had such a comprehensive, detailed, and uniformly executed study been undertaken. Indeed, such is the impact of the work that the brutality of the force used by the invading soldiers and scholars easily recedes from view as one studies the texts, plates and maps produced by the expedition. Not surprisingly then, most Western scholars have focused on the prodigious amount of work achieved by the members of the expedition in their short one- to three-year stay in Egypt, rather than on the ideological load carried by the Description de l’Egypte.

Ideology pervades the Description de l’Egypte but is most clearly expressed in Jean-Baptiste Fourier’s Préface. The Préface served as the general introduction to the Description. In it, Fourier, one of the foremost mathematicians of his day, set the tone of the work and sought to prepare the reader to understand correctly the expedition and the work of the scholars. A sub-theme in his discussion was the justification of the considerable international disruption caused by the expedition. To this end he described the conquest as undertaken in the name of the Ottoman Empire and regional peace and prosperity. However, somewhat contradictorily, he
also pointed out the enormous potential benefits to France of an Egyptian colony, both for the produce it could provide for France and for its role as a market for French manufacturers. What could be better than such a rich colony so inexpensively close to home?

The main point of the Préface, however, was the establishment of the value and merit of the Description in the minds of its readers and for posterity. Each of the characteristic aspects of the Enlightenment Project described by Habermas, Horkheimer and Adorno and Harvey is in clear evidence in Fourier's Préface. It is pervaded by a strong messianism. It makes an implicit and explicit argument for creative destruction in the name of universality and intellectual and cultural unity. The understanding it claims to have, it bases on facts which can be seen to be true. Finally, it engages the reader in the endeavour which is the principal aim of the Description, the building of a mythical Egypt.

The messianism of the Préface is linked to the myth of progress, the vision of European and especially French civilization as superior in every regard to the civilization of modern Egypt, and the attribution of that superiority to the benefits of the tradition of western science and technology. Fourier argues that a country as blessed by nature as Egypt needs the benefits of French law and the technology to realize its full potential. Napoleon (in the first unexpunged edition) is described as an individual whose vision penetrates into the future and allows him to establish the true foundations of the power and prosperity of states. Thus, Napoleon's aims, as Fourier saw them, were:

- to abolish the tyranny of the Mamelukes, to extend irrigation and cultivation, to open a constant communication between the Mediterranean and the Arabian Gulf, to form commercial establishments, to offer the Orient the useful example of European industry, finally, to render the constitution of the inhabitants softer and to procure them all the advantages of a perfected civilisation.

Even the indigenous plants and animals of the country were inadequate and Fourier encouraged the reader to think of Egypt as a garden ready to receive Europe's crops. Egypt then, needed France and the benefits of French culture and science which Napoleon and his scholars were selflessly willing to provide.

The concept of creative destruction is highly developed in the Préface and suggests the accuracy of Edward Said's, Martin Bernal's and Timothy Mitchell's observations concerning the writing out of Islamic and non-white culture from Western history. Fourier pays relatively little attention to modern Islamic Egypt and to anything which is not monumental or in some way deemed eternal. The everyday Egyptian is absent from the pages of the Préface, except as the stock character: victim of Islamic rule or beneficiary of French cultural munificence. The entire period of Islamic domination is depicted as a barbarous interlude. Fourier attributes Islamic and/or Mameluke barbarity to the large number of 'unintelligible thoughts' in the Koran, to Mohammed's relative uninterest in questions of administration and good government and to the failure of the Arabs to recognize their place on the rung of the hierarchy of cultures in their conquest of Egypt. He compares the Barbarian conquest of Europe to the Arab conquest of Egypt and comments that at least the European barbarians had the insight to recognize the superiority of the customs of the people they were conquering.

The Arabs, by contrast, had more fixed customs and opinions, which suffered from the confusion and superstition of the ancient doctrine of the Orient. Persuaded that they knew all that was true and useful, they rejected a priori the customs and arts of the conquered people.

It was precisely this 'ancient doctrine of the Orient' that had to be destroyed in Egypt so as to allow the immutable, monumental and universal once again to assume dominance. What this required was a conquest, not just a conquest of arms but also a conquest by science. Significantly, Fourier linked the military conquest and the conquest by science through cartography and mapping:

Among the objects worthy of the attention of scholarly Europe, one of the principal ones is the exact determination of geographic location ... We were many times obliged to replace our weapons with geometrical instruments and, in a sense, to fight over or to conquer the terrain that we were to measure.

The universality of science, measurement and cartography would bring the ultimate benefit to Egypt, its unity with France as a province of France. Then and only then could there be a return to the universally applicable laws which, in Fourier's view, had created and guarded the greatness and the monumentality of ancient Egypt.
Critical to this view was the sense of having truth, the ultimate universal, on one's side. Truth was largely assumed to be synonymous with science by Fourier. If something could be represented with precision, detail, or accuracy, it clearly had the value of truth. The ultimate in truth was reproducibility, or what Horkheimer and Adorno would call 'tautology'. This is reflected in Fourier's praise of the drawings and maps of monuments produced by the expedition's engineers: '... one could use them to construct edifices identical to those that we have described'. Implicit in the concept of mapping and reproducibility was an emphasis on the importance of relative position, or on the position of key features relative to all others. Fourier, and the scholars in general, sought to capture Egypt, and particularly ancient Egypt, in its entirety through mapping and sketching. Thus, when talking about the hieroglyphs, Fourier commented, '... we preserved not only their individual forms, but the order and disposition of the signs'. Further, the mapping of ancient Egypt allowed its integration into the system of French national mapping and into the imagination of a France obsessed with the numerical and graphic accuracy suggested by Gaspard Monge's descriptive geometry and born of a century of extraordinary progress in the mathematical sciences. French soldiers and scholars might have been forced to leave Egypt, but they left it with a monument (the Description itself) which gave them access to an Egypt more true and more real that the Egypt, according to Fourier, sullied by centuries of oriental despotism. In their monument to French science and rationality, they had an Egypt they could reproduce henceforth in museums, in the writing of history and in creations of art and architecture.

Clearly there was a great deal of myth in much of what has already been discussed. It is, nevertheless, worth emphasizing how openly the mythology was constructed, even in the midst of discussions of truth, accuracy and topological exactitude. Thus Fourier began the Précis with an entirely mythological positioning of Egypt relative to Europe:

Egypt, placed between Africa and Asia and communicating easily with Europe, occupies the center of the Ancient Continent.

Which ancient continent would that have been? The ancient continent which was home to the parent civilizations to France? Such constructions abound in the Précis and elsewhere in the Description. In a similar vein, although ancient Egypt is seen by the scholars to reside mostly in the architecture which is substantially ignored by the present population (except when it is being used as a quarry), Fourier manages a construction which confuses the modern population of Egypt with that of ancient Egypt for the purposes of depicting the Arabs as a temporary aberration with no social depth. Speaking of the advantages of Egypt as a potential colony, Fourier commented:

We would not have to transport cultivators there in slavery; and, far from exercising violence against the indigenous people, we will return to them all that an imprudent and tyrannical government has removed from them.

This conception of a somehow eternally ancient Egyptian population is an oft-repeated construction in the Description. Without question, however, the most important myth perpetrated in the Description is the identification of ancient Egypt with modern France. This closely resembles Habermas' concept of modernity's need, while it demolishes the traditional, to build a secret identification with the classical. Thus, the religion of ancient Egypt must have functioned as Napoleon had decreed religion should function in the French state. It must have 'lent to the civil institutions the support of an immutable authority'. In spite of the fact that the hieroglyphs were not yet decipherable, Fourier knew with certainty that:

For a long succession of centuries Egypt benefitted from an enlightened and powerful government: the laws, the public customs, the domestic practices converged on the same aim; they were based on the knowledge of human customs and on the eternal principles of order and justice, which are engraved on all hearts.

Claude Traunecker has described the effect of this identification myth on the study of ancient Egypt, or Egyptology. It shaped far more, however, than French understanding of ancient Egypt. It profoundly influenced the representation of all aspects of the country: modern, ancient and natural. What was good and positive about Egypt was what could be identified with France. The rest was slated for destruction.
Cartographic representation unifies the Description de l'Egypte

At first glance and perhaps even on the first reading, the Description de l'Egypte appears to have limited coherence. The topographic maps, the plates (which included a large number of maps and plans) and the various volumes of text were all bound separately. The text section itself was divided into 'Antiquités', 'Etat moderne' and 'Histoire naturelle'. The 'Antiquités' volumes were further divided into essays devoted to description and those deemed analytical memoirs. In addition, the various essays were printed at different times, requiring the subscriber to put them in the correct order in the book. The impression of incoherence is accentuated by the sheer physical enormity of many of the volumes. Nevertheless, the Description is a strongly unified text. Its unity lies in the mission of scientific representation that was the guiding ideal for all of its authors but most especially for its editor, Edme François Jomard. That ideal found its strongest expression in the maps which expressed most clearly the Enlightenment concern to know the truth about all that lay within the human and physical realm.

It is ironic, then, that the topographic maps produced by the scholars in Egypt were separated out from the rest of the Description and published under the auspices not of the Commission de la Description de l'Egypte but of the Ministère de la Guerre. The reasons for this are known to us. The maps were so effective in representation that Napoleon feared their utility to others. In addition, there was something of a rights-of-ownership battle between the largely civilian Commission and the military over the cartography produced on the expedition. It was a debate which incidentally suggests some contemporary ambiguity between military and scientific conquest. It was, however, largely a jurisdictional fight for the financial benefit accruing from the sale of the maps between the Dépôt de la Guerre and the Commission. Jomard, the general editor responsible to the Commission, regarded the separate publication of the maps as nothing short of a disaster. He fought a long battle for control of their production and publication, in the course of which he claimed that the text added nothing but details to the maps and that the maps were the essence of the Description. Fourier echoed this sentiment in the Préface published in 1809.

Dépôt retained control over production and publication – and publication of the maps was delayed until 1826 – they were eventually published as part of the Description.

In spite of the delay in their appearance, the maps – even in absentia – clearly functioned as the conceptual synthesis of the Description. Most of the essays in both the 'Description' and 'Mémoires' section were written to be read with the topographic map available for ready consultation. Readers were frequently directed to the topographic and other maps. Indeed, some authors admitted that the mapping of information had been their primary aim and that they had only secondarily written essays to explain or accompany their maps. Other authors maintained a dialogue in the text of their essays with the compilers of the topographic map, devoting a goodly amount of text space to the discussion of points of cartographic detail. In addition, the very definition of Egypt used in the Description was cartographic. Jomard considered the possibility of regarding Egypt as only those lands watered by the Nile but ultimately settled on a rectangle whose exact dimensions he provided.

The very word 'Description' seems to have strongly implied mapping in the early nineteenth century. Girard, in his study of the agrarian measures of Egypt for example, chose to understand the ancient 'descriptions' of Egypt mentioned by Herodotus as having been cadastral surveys. The Description was, certainly, pervaded with a sense of the need to describe in the cartographic sense: to measure, sketch out and place relative to everything else. The musician Villoteau, instead of merely describing the musical instruments of ancient Egypt, sketched them from the painting on monuments and in ruins throughout Egypt, thus imitating the method and regime of the surveyors. He was, clearly, unable to resort to this procedure for his essay on the nature of ancient Egyptian music. So, instead, he sought the numerical structuring of ancient Egyptian music through a complex analysis of contemporary Arabic music and modern European music and the assumption of the linkedness of ancient Egyptian music to the universal of astronomy. Although this approach had some elements of mapping, he was unable to map out this problem in exactly the manner in which his engineering colleagues were mapping Egypt and its monuments. This left him with a sense of the uninterest and irrelevancy of his research. He tried to alleviate this by finding a social utility for his
work: that of commentary on the backward state of the Orient vis-à-vis the West. This ultimately led him to compare oriental music to prostitution, which ‘pleases only the debauched and disgusts the noble and true’.45 Similarly, Jomard’s study of the hieroglyphs consisted almost entirely of recording their composition and distribution for the purposes of classification.46 His observation that ‘Here, the monuments speak . . .’47 suggests that for him the mapping of the monuments was an end in itself. Rozière, too, in his essays on the mineralogy of Egypt emphasized the sketching of specimens and the introduction of new more rigorous scientific techniques for doing so.48 One of the medical specialists on the expedition also suggested the topographic mapping of both disease and the conditions conducive to disease, although he was unable to carry that out during his short stay in Egypt.49

The reader may note that the definition of a map has been somewhat stretched in the preceding paragraph. In fact, it is difficult to separate map from text in the Description. They were all part of an encyclopedic descriptive endeavour. In this sense, the Description cannot be understood as an illustrated book: the sketches and maps were not designed to illustrate but to share the load of description and analysis. The editor was attempting to achieve a chorus of rarely combined media. The maps formed the bridge between the density and yet relative lack of differentiation of the picture or image and the thinner articulation of text.50 The sketch offers a level of completeness and a strength of image and impression which is not to be found in the text but which flickers in the map. There is a precision in the text and the map which the sketches strive for but fail to achieve. In the Description the genres reach for each other and almost merge.

The reasons behind this attempt to reach are complex. If one accepts, as I have argued elsewhere,51 that scholars such as Jomard, Jacotin, Coraboeuf, Chabrol de Volvic, Girard, Rozière, Le Père and others left a significant ‘geographic’ imprint on the Description, then one might look to developments within the discipline of geography to explain the unity of text, image and map in the Description. At the end of the eighteenth and into the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, geographers were beginning to rethink their role within the divisions of human knowledge. At a time when the natural sciences, the mathematical description of the earth, and the description and analysis of humans and their society were gradually hiving off into distinct disciplines, geographers and others began to wonder out loud where the originality and indispensability of the geographic contribution lay. One answer, perhaps the most traditional, was that it lay in description – not just textual or cartographic but also graphic description. There was, consequently, in this period an attempt to explore the limits and potential of descriptions of all sorts, graphic and textual.52 The centre of much of this experimentation in the last decade of the eighteenth century and into the 1830s was the Ecole Polytechnique. This was the school through which, after 1794, many geographical engineers passed on their way to more specialized training. Gaspard Monge was one of the founders of the school, one of its most popular and influential professors and the inventor of descriptive geometry.

Descriptive geometry may well have been at the root of some of this experimentation. Monge’s new technique had been taught to military engineers at the Ecole de Mezière since at least 1775 and was finally made available to the larger public through his courses at the Ecole Normale and the Ecole Polytechnique in 1794 and 1795. Descriptive geometry was the art and science of depicting three-dimensional objects on paper with mathematical rigour. Monge had arrived at his mathematical technique of using projection for the construction of three-dimensional objects by applying geometry and analysis to similar problems across a large number of disciplines: the depiction in plan and elevation (in architecture); perspective representation (in art); the interpretation and calculation of the throwing of shadows (in astronomy and astronomical instrument design); and the theory and execution of map projections.53 The success of the method and its utility to technicians and artists who sought to depict objects in space must have suggested to geographers that combining media, and particularly combining them in a rigorous manner, might lead to a new and more enlightening mode of description.

The Description de l’Egypte bears signs of considerable contemporary interest in the application of graphic and almost mathematical rigour to the problem of description. It was a preoccupation which effectively blurred the distinction between sketch and map. The plates which depicted monuments surrounded by landscape were based on careful measurements which Jomard, for example, deemed so accurate that he was comfortable taking
measurements from them for his essay on the metric system of the ancient Egyptians. Many of these landscape sketches in their final engraved form even included cartographic-style index numbers for quick consultation using the plate legends. The plate legends also gave the plates a distinctly cartographic flavour by explaining precisely where each view was taken from in relation to a large number of other views and especially in relation to the accompanying maps and plans. A few of the plates which combine landscape sketches, plans and maps on a single page are remarkably effective at giving the reader a full sense of location and landscape (Fig. 1). The accuracy of the sketches was constantly emphasized throughout the texts. Finally, Conté’s engraving machine, which gave an unprecedented accuracy of line work in the engravings, further emphasized throughout the texts. Finally, Conté’s engraving machine, which gave an unprecedented accuracy of line work in the engravings, further suggested accuracy and truth.

The line between map and landscape sketch was rendered even more fuzzy by an occasional playfulness with cartographic expression. The map of the Natron Lakes produced by Redouté and Duchanoy is a good example of this (Fig. 2). This map was entitled ‘topographic map’ but showed the men, horses, donkeys and camels of the exploratory expedition walking across the salt flats of the Natron Lakes and across the face of the map. No doubt the map authors deemed this the most visually striking way to stress the dry and solid nature of the lakes. Another topographic map showed the banks of the Nile reflecting in the river’s water. Both of these representations served to bring the map and landscape genres closer together.

In addition, the maps, sketches, plans and text all reflected a concern with measurement, numbers, accuracy and truth. In numerous places in the Description the maps were described as ‘truth’, precisely because they were based on measurement and, in contrast to the landscape sketches, on a measured grid that spanned the entire country. There was, indeed, such a focus on measurement that the modern reader occasionally loses track of the point. Reasonably enough, Girard sought to measure the flow of the Nile and the productivity of the various crops of Egypt. He wrote another article entirely devoted to agrarian measurement systems. In yet another article, he sought to turn an analysis of the Nilometer found near Syene into a search for a universal translation system for understanding the measurement systems used by all societies that he deemed worth studying. Le Père, in his discussion of the feasibility of cutting a new Suez Canal, put his measurements and their explanation at the front of his article rather than in an appendix where, to our eyes, it would more properly belong. Jomard devoted disproportionate space in an article supposed to be devoted to a comparison of two of Egypt’s lakes, to explaining his measurements. Finally, in a remarkable projection of the preoccupations of Revolutionary and Ideologue France on ancient Egypt, the Memphis pyramid was measured with great care by a team of scholars and supposed by Jomard to have been ‘a metric monument . . . designed to serve as the national repository of the unity of measures’.

The measurement was not, however, purposeless. At issue was the ‘truth’ and ‘true’ possession of the ‘true’ Egypt. Another aspect of this preoccupation with truth and its role in ‘taking possession’ intellectually is suggested by the use of references in the Description. The Description de l’Egypte was very consciously part of a large European (or European-claimed) literature on Egypt and also part of a series of traditions of scholarship. Napoleon’s scholars did not simply come to Egypt with measuring instruments, clothing, supplies and weapons. They brought books, indeed a whole library, restocked from France in the course of the expedition. Even before leaving France, numerous books, maps and papers were consulted on Egypt. It is not surprising, then, that the authors in the Description maintained complex and extremely lengthy discussions with modern and ancient texts on the nature of Egypt. Location was disputed with d’Anville. Questions raised by Volney in 1787 were explored, championed or refuted. Jomard used Laplace, Fourier, Pauton, Duvillard, Malthus and Petty in his discussion of fertility and mortality in Egypt; and d’Anville, Le Père Quien, Schultens and de Sacy in his discussion of Egyptian cadastres. Sometimes the work of all known (modern and ancient) scholars on a particular location were collected together and commented upon. Eratosthenes, Herodotus and any number of other ancient authors were consulted and scrutinized. Sometimes, although much more rarely, even Arab scholars were consulted. Indigenous sources of verbal information were, however, scrupulously avoided as unreliable (except, reluctantly and suspiciously, for the pronunciation of Arabic place names). Sometimes these studies were necessary to the question at hand. Often, however, they seem superfluous. But this is to misunderstand the purpose of referencing authors in the context of the intellectual and imperialist conquest of Egypt.
Figure 1. Plate 100 in volume 2 of the 'Etat moderne' series showing a view and a map of the eastern desert in the region between Asyût (Sýout) and the Red Sea.
The Description was designed to replace and, indeed, reconstruct Egypt. The Description, composed of graphically rendered terrain measurement and of the accounts and disputations of all the known or remembered scholars versed on Egypt, was considered better than Egypt itself. After all, the Description not only encapsulated Egypt but ostentatiously paraded an enormous body of Western thought about Egypt. The Description, then, with its many references can be seen, in the spirit of Edward Said and Bruno Latour, as a form of taking possession of Egypt not just physically and for today but intellectually, in the name of an historical and scientific tradition, and for posterity. At the same time, there is no doubt that it was a sincere attempt to bring the entire tradition of Western scholarship, including a scientific methodology, to bear on understanding and interpreting Egypt for the West and within its terms of reference.

Maps and the discipline of imperialism
Maps and the mapping process were not merely the central unifying focus of the Description de l'Egypte, they were vital to the entire imperial venture in Egypt. Maps were the key to disciplinary power in French-dominated Egypt. Disciplinary power, according to Timothy Mitchell:

... works not from the outside but from within, not at the level of an entire society, but at the level of detail, and not by restricting individuals and their actions but by producing them. A restrictive, exterior power gives way to an internal, productive power. Disciplines work within local domains and institutions, entering into particular social processes, breaking them down into separate functions, rearranging the parts, increasing their efficiency and precision, and reassembling them into more productive and powerful combinations. These methods produce the organised power of armies, schools and factories, and other distinctive
Maps were to be the primary instrument of the social, economic, political and physical restructuring of the country. This restructuring, whereby Egypt would be wrenched from the Orient and reoriented, so to speak, to complement the economy, society and polity of France, demanded radical change at all levels of social existence. Not only was the national identity to be linked to France but agriculture, commerce and industry were to be reorganized and restructured. This was to be achieved in part through the physical reform of the country: the digging of a canal through the Isthmus of Suez, the rebuilding of the canals supporting Egypt’s agricultural system and the construction of barrages. The actions, behaviours and everyday practices of Egyptians were also targeted for radical change. In particular, the ‘arts et metiers’, archived so faithfully by Conté, in one of the plate volumes of the ‘Etat moderne’ section, were slated for reform as part of the economic transformation of Egypt.

Nothing more clearly suggests this multiple-scale project of ‘reform’ than the maps, topographic and otherwise, produced in Egypt.

On the most unconscious level the maps were used to make an argument about the unity of Egypt and France. A number of the key features of the 47-sheet topographic map and the three-sheet geographic map of Egypt were designed to link France and Egypt on a monumental nation-to-nation scale. In particular, the use of a common prime meridian gave Egypt a location relative to France. The distance from the ‘meridian of Paris’ was marked on the top left-hand corner of every sheet and loudly announced Egypt’s geodetic distance from the heart of French culture and power. Meanwhile, the perpendicular, which ran through the Memphis pyramid was identified, as such, only on the map sheets which directly touched the pyramid itself. In addition, Egypt was to be depicted on the same scale as that used in the Cassini topographic map of France: 1:86 400, thus linking by scale the two countries across the Mediterranean. The scale was ultimately modified as part of France’s conversion to metric scales but the concept of unification through uniformization remained intact. This uniformization was also apparent in the symbolism used for the maps which conformed to those instituted for all French topographic maps by the ‘Commission chargé... à la perfection de la topographie...’ in 1802. Some of those symbols, in particular the symbols for battles won and battles lost, gave a distinct ‘us – them’ flavour to the maps. The ‘us’ represented were those who made the maps and who won the bulk of the battles, or in any case, the bulk of the encounters recognized as battles.

The concern physically to reform Egypt’s infrastructure was best expressed and implemented through the medium-scale topographic and other maps and plans found in the text and plate volumes of the Description. These showed where the vestiges of the former Suez Canal were to be found, gave measures of height of the proposed canal zone and described the condition, profiles and location of some of Egypt’s principal canal systems. Most of the topographic maps sought to depict the caravan and commercial routes crisscrossing Egypt, with the aim ultimately of gaining control over them, although this ambition substantially eluded the French forces while they were in Egypt. There is little question that what the Napoleonic and successor regimes most wanted to control and rationalize in Egypt was the agricultural and land holding (and by extension, taxation) system. To that end, Napoleon attempted to institute private property by edict. When that failed, he and his successors determined to employ cartography or, more particularly, cadastral mapping as a more subtle and clandestine engine of reform. The cadastre was initiated but not far advanced when the French forces were forcibly evicted from Egypt. The importance of this information to the sense of control sought by the French in Egypt is, nevertheless, strongly expressed in the topographic maps. It is clear from even a cursory examination of the manuscript maps and what survives of the surveyors’ notebooks used in the construction of the topographic map, that relatively little precise information on the extent of cultivation and patterns of land ownership had been gathered prior to the final defeat of the French forces. This is in no way surprising – there was simply inadequate time for the topographic mapping of the country. What is surprising is that the cartographers chose to use a system of symbols on their final printed maps which suggested very precise knowledge of the exact
limits of cultivation and even of the property lines between major and minor land holdings. The maps, then, expressed fond and deep delusions of control (Fig. 3).

The most intimate scale of cartographic intrusion and manipulation in Egypt was the assault on language and place of the system of transliteration adopted for the place names on the topographic map. Here, too, in the area of language used for the identification of place and belonging, there were ambitions of rationalizing reform. The system of transliteration ultimately adopted for the topographic map of Egypt was based on Volney’s Simplification des langues orientales. The Roman alphabet proposed by Volney was very much Enlightenment-inspired in the sense described above. The ideals on which it was based were unity, uniformity, rationality, consistency and attachment to European civilization. Volney was not merely proposing a system for recreating Arabic sounds with roman letters but the replacement of the Arabic alphabet which he saw as full of ‘the gratuitous hindrances which routine use has imposed on it’, with a Roman alphabet. On the alienation that this would cause of the literary traditions of the Arab lands, he commented:

... an ancient prejudice vainly praises Oriental literature. Good taste and reason proclaim that there is no sound basis of instruction in the positive sciences in these productions: their history recounts nothing but fables; their poetry nothing but hyperbole; their philosophy professes nothing but sophisms; their medicine provides only recipes; they hardly even have a name for metaphysics, chemistry and higher mathematics. The spirit of a European can only shrink and spoil in this school. It behoves Orientals to come to the schools of the modern West ... these [the Orientals], surprised to hear their languages spoken more purely, read more fluently, written and learnt more quickly by strangers than by them themselves, will want to know the mechanical instrument behind this process. They will end by discussing and studying our new European Alphabet ...
The ultimate aim of this system, then, was alteration of the way Arabic-speaking peoples used their own language, not just in writing but in speech, on the ground and in their very sense of the world around them. The landscape of Egypt was to be changed from 'a chaos of Arabic names' to European order.

One might suppose that the expedition cartographers were ignorant of the ideological load carried by Volney's alphabetical system. In fact, all indications suggest that they simply accepted it uncritically. Volney was himself invited to the Dépôt de la Guerre to present and defend his system before a tribunal of 12 experts. Interestingly enough, when recounting this event some 20 years later, Volney commented that he had originally suggested that three scientists well-versed in mathematics adjudicate because, in his view, transliteration was really a straightforward 'algebraic operation'. In stark contrast to Barthes and the post-modernists, then, linguistic and cultural translation was substantially unproblematic for Volney. Its shape and particular direction were 'reasonably' derived from the natural dominance of the superior culture.

Maps were such powerful tools in the proposed radical reform of Egypt precisely because they could be used to attack and radically alter the society on a broad range of scales, from the national, to the regional, to the intimately personal. Maps allowed a coordination and concentration of intrusion that was relatively covert, thanks to the inherently elite and secretive nature of the cartography of this period and to the centralized coordination that maps permit and perhaps encourage. It was, then, an extremely effective instrument of imperialism, in powerful consonance with the ideals of the Enlightenment.

Map and image in the representation of Egypt

If Edward Said's Orientalism has taught us anything, it is that representation — or the representation of the 'other' to the world and even to those being represented — has been at least as powerful in destabilizing and radically altering societies as major economic, technological and political reorganizations. This was certainly true in early nineteenth-century Egypt, in part because the short duration of the French military presence in that country limited the scope and depth of economic, technological and political change. The Description de l'Egypte and thus the maps and images in the Description, constituted one of the most exceptional exercises of representation in recorded history. The Description was not a mere travel narrative with views. It was a detailed terrain and text-based study of the country which sought to capture the essential Egypt in the multimedia of map, image and text. What, then, were the essential features of the representation of Egypt produced in the Description and what do they tell us about the French image of Egypt and their image of themselves?

Once again, it is important to emphasize the importance of cartography in this representation. Large-scale topographic mapping covering an entire country was a relatively new phenomenon even in late eighteenth-century France. As the phenomenon of the topographic map was still young, scholars, scientists, administrators, and particularly the educated reader had not yet learned to approach the map critically. As described above, it was the maps which carried the greatest authority in the Description. This is in part because the map best embodied the ideals of the Description: a complete, unified and yet detailed encapsulation of Egypt. As Christian Jacob has so succinctly put it:

The maps ... becomes the support for all of the knowledge of the world. Like all encyclopedias, its vocation is to 'compile and collect the scholarly consensus of the moment'. The symbolic value of the object lies in this tension between the closure and the infinite expansion favoured by reading: referencing back, decipherment and commentary on this allusive and fragmented writing. The map is the encyclopedia. Both arouse the same dream of completeness and mastery of an inaccessible totality.

But the authority was also derived from their association with measurement, mathematics and observational instrumentation which lent them apparent objectivity. The military-style coordination of men, resources and functions which their execution implied — from data collection to the final production — gave them additional authority in an age and culture which had learned to respect and value such operations highly. Their expression of position relative to the subject also endowed a measure of authority. The topographic map was drawn from a perspective where map maker/reader could see everything and yet not be seen. From that vantage point, the map maker/reader is at a precisely defined distance from the subject and the subject is rendered an object. The language of the
map also implied knowledge and understanding of a special symbology, available to the map reader through the key provided and explained on the second page of the ‘Carte topographique . . .’ but which would have been substantially meaningless to those on the ground. Finally, this cartography – and indeed most cartography – allowed little in the way of qualified statements and few are to be found on the maps. This again enhanced their almost strident authority. At the same time, the maps were graphic and to some extent ‘artistic’ and thus more immediately accessible than text, especially the often very technical text of the Description. In addition, as discussed above, the close association between map and sketch in the Description meant that the authority associated with the maps was, to some extent, also bestowed on the sketches. As a result, it is difficult to separate a discussion of the maps from a discussion of the plates. We can regard the voices to be heard in the maps and the plates, then, as, while not identical, certainly in unison.

The first and most striking feature of the Description’s representation, particularly given the mathematical measurement-based source of its authority, is its flirtation with fantasy, or invention. In fact, the maps and highly detailed and accurate drawing (the ultimate proof of reality) were used to create and legitimate a fantasy Egypt in which the characters could be moved around, named and characterized just as the topographer or artist chose. The foundation of the fantasy was a truth, the physical existence of the monuments of Egypt. The fantasy itself was that the only true Egypt was ancient Egypt; that it was still imbued with meaning and worth far greater than anything the present inhabitants could bring to the country; that there was an intimate association between modern France, French scholars, French engineers and the civilization of ancient Egypt; and that the monumentality of the Description was part of the proof of France’s association with the monumentality of Egypt. The purpose of this truth-imbued fantasy was constantly and convincingly to evoke the larger truth of the superiority and depth of French civilization.

That ancient Egypt was the only true Egypt is expressed almost uniformly throughout the Description. It is most striking in many of the topographic maps, such as in plate 1, volume 3 of the ‘Antiquités’ plates covering Thebes (Fig. 4). Although the ruins, river, roads, relief and ground cover, including a palm grove and cultivated fields, are depicted in great detail, the village of Louqṣor, next to the remains is represented only as a blacked-out area with the descriptor: ‘Village of Louqṣor built on ruins’. In the same vein, the locals were often used as graphic devices in the sketches of ancient monuments. Thus, we read in one of the captions: ‘We placed near this block a group of locals to serve as scale for the monuments’.

Generally, the modern Egyptians depicted in the sketches of ruins were either standing about or smoking idly, meandering through the sketch, serving the French, or pilfering building materials for the Egyptian homes in which the scholars showed so little interest. Perhaps the best example of this is the view of the interior of a monument at El Kab sketched by Cecile. This depicts a French scholar (perhaps Cecile himself) admiring with an expression of gentle pleasure the ancient art of the Egyptians, while a local man sits smoking insignificantly near the foot of the statuary and staring vacuously into space with a look of brutal indifference on his face (Fig. 5).

The number and beauty of the ‘Antiquités’ plates far outranks the ‘Etat moderne’ plates. This reflects the bias of both the Description and the time. Much of what would interest us about modern Egypt was excluded from cartographic depiction in the Description. The maps and sketches reflect little of the housing, daily routine and way of life of the average Egyptian peasant or, indeed, of the settled Arab or Bedouin. Arguably, contemporaries were more fascinated by antiquities than by the everyday life of peasants. This is clear in the monumental and severe architectural work of Etienne-Louis Boullée, Philippe Duboy Lequeu and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, in the sketches of Piranesi and the French school in Rome, and in the depictions of ancient France in Baron Taylor’s Voyages pittoresques. But while these works were deliberately focused on the ancient and the monumental – not claiming to encompass all of France or Italy – the Description was avowedly devoted to both modern and ancient Egypt. In addition, the focus on the ancient in Egypt carried an ideological dimension certainly not present in France or in Italy. As Fourier made clear in his Préface, Islamic Egypt was understood as a temporary historical aberration in the geography of Egypt and its present population was corrupted by virtue of its corruption. This is not to say that modern Egypt was entirely absent from the Description but that there was a decided imbalance in depiction in all three forms of expression: map, image and text. Indeed, with the exception of the
natural history essays, texts devoted to the modern state of Egypt frequently rapidly reverted into discussions of ancient Egypt. As already mentioned, Conté produced a number of remarkable plates devoted to the 'arts et métiers' of the Egyptians. These, however, were less focused on what was later to be known as 'genre de vie' than on Egypt's productive technology and on the costumes and portraits of 'types'.83 From the maps and sketches we gain little insight into the life of the village. When the focus is on Cairo, as in the huge map of the city, we have even less sense of the life of Cairo as a whole, as a cultural entity, or as an organization that somehow works on terms and with rules of its own.84 What is deemed monumental in Islam is recorded, such as the Mosque of Sultan Hasan or the house of Osman Bey in Cairo. The mosques to be found in every village are either not depicted or do not have a sufficiently distinctive symbology to distinguish them from wells. Further, neither text, nor plate, nor map makes reference to any form of Islamic organization or education, and texts only rarely mention 'Oriental' literature. Finally, and perhaps less surprisingly, there is little attempt to depict Egyptian individuals (with one or two notable exceptions) or anything about how life is experienced within and around the architecture.

The impression of an intimate association between the invading scholars and the civilization of ancient Egypt is deftly woven into the plates, maps and, as already discussed, into the text. The first and relatively subtle sign of this is a distinct preoccupation with authorship. Each plate and map carries the name of the artists, engineers or cartographers involved in its production. In addition to that, however, many of the volumes, and especially...
those devoted to ancient Egypt, provide a list of all of the scholars, engineers and artists involved in the production of each plate. The most telling concern to mark presence and to declare squatter’s rights, so to speak, is to be found in the propensity to self-portraiture in the ‘Antiquités’ plates. In a very high proportion of the plates devoted to the depiction of ancient Egypt, the sketcher has drawn himself or a sketching colleague into the plate. What is being expressed here? Are the sketchers declaring their presence, as others might – and did – write ‘I was here’ on a wall? Are they attempting to make...
themselves part of the monuments of Egypt? Interestingly enough, this auto-portrait tendency is entirely absent from the ‘Etat moderne’ plates. Sometimes the manner in which the sketchers depict themselves is highly suggestive of their attitude. Cécile, again, holds his sketchbook and stands on the foot of the Colossus with a bearing that at once suggests respect and dominance through representation (Fig. 6). Better yet, is Dutertre’s depiction of either himself or Denon in the midst of a stark landscape under the protection of an umbrella, sketching one of the more damaged heaps of ancient rubble in Upper Egypt (Fig. 7). Draped seductively on the ground behind him is a woman.
(nationality and identity undecipherable) who is kindly holding onto the reins of the horse as she waits for the occupied sketcher. Here fantasy, the erotic and the exotic are all combined to relieve any tedium attached to antiquities. It also suggests, however, something of the complex motivations and emotions associated with the conquest of Egypt.

Another aspect of this fantasy association of modern France and ancient Egypt is the depiction, in a number of the plates of Egyptian temples, of either ancient Egyptians, Romans or Greeks. The reader, imagining him or herself to be gazing upon the ruins of ancient Egypt, is suddenly catapulted back in time to witness a procession or to gaze upon ancient scholars in Thebes as they wander about contemplating and discussing higher matters of state and philosophy. What do these depictions represent beyond a sort of hazy historical reconstruction? ‘Here we are’; ‘We understand’; ‘We know’; ‘But for a mere matter of time, this is us’?

The strong tendency to monumentality in the Description de l’Egypte and the use of monumentality to connect France with ancient Egypt is nowhere clearer than in the Frontispiece for the entire work (Fig. 8). The whole is a carved and engraved slab of stone which the ‘Explication du Frontispice’ describes as ‘an Egyptian doorway’ looking from the banks of the Mediterranean out onto Egypt. This was a cartographic-style panorama also used by Giuseppe Bagetti in Italy to depict the French conquest of Italy. It illustrates well Timothy Mitchell’s concept of the European preoccupation with representation or with ‘intizam almanzar’. This he translates as ‘the organisation of the view’; ‘the organisation of everything and everything organised to represent, to recall like the exhibition, some larger meaning’. The stone-slab doorway is an enduring and solid monument, the equal of any of the monuments depicted in the Description. It incorporates some Egyptian symbology but concentrates on telling the story of the French conquest of Egypt. Most interesting is the picture it provides of Egypt itself.

Distributed around the carved door frame are a variety of Egyptian symbols which remain unexplained: the wing of a bird of prey with reptilian
Figure 8. Frontispiece to the Description de l’Egypte
scales; cobras; the honey bee; bird-lions with serpent tails; scarabs; vases; torches; etc. On top of the door frame, heading the picture, so to speak, the conquest of the Mamelukes (curved swords; horseback warriors) is depicted. The conquest is led by a Roman warrior in a chariot, 'Le Héro'. He is followed peacefully by phalanxes of women, three-across, graciously dressed in Roman-style garb. These women represent the return of the practical arts to Egypt. They advance on the Egyptians in order: war, followed by agriculture, then geography, with engineering picking up the rear. The last woman seems to be lifting her foot from an artist’s palette (perhaps a subtle artistic commentary — intended or not — on the place of the arts in Napoleonic France). Behind the defeated Mamelukes lies the Nile personified. He sits idly by barely watching the drama unfolding next to him. Beside him rests a horn of plenty (clearly indicating the potential of the country and its relationship with the Nile). His arm is resting on a crocodile poking through some marsh plants by the banks of the Nile but he himself is leaning comfortably against one of the sides of a pyramid. For those unable to understand the equation being constructed between Roman conquest, the Roman Empire and the Napoleonic conquest of Egypt, to the far left of the image in the water behind the arts, is a ship bearing a sign which reads ‘armée d’italie’. This army, the Napoleonic army, has even conquered the armies of modern Rome.

On each side of the door frame are the names and insignia of the battles engaged in Egypt and Syria, both those won and lost. On the door sill at the bottom of the frame, the Arab population of Egypt is depicted. In the centre of the scene is a circular symbol of a snake eating its own tail, an emblem of immortality, which encircles the letter ‘N’ sporting a royal crown. The Mamelukes on both sides of the ‘N’ have lowered their guns and weapons before the ‘N’ and are gazing upon it with ferocity.

The scene framed by the monumental doorway represents the vision of Egypt which pervades the Description. All of the outstanding monuments of Egypt are depicted in the foreground, out of context, as though they had all recently been collected together to be taken on board a ship about to sail into the Mediterranean. Inscriptions, bas-reliefs, a zodiac and statuary are all clearly visible as are a few plants between the stacked monuments. The river, which looks more like a canal, twists into the distance showing more ruins in the desert. Entirely absent from the picture are people, agriculture or agricultural implements, signs of modern settlement, or anything Islamic. This is the Egypt that the writers and editor of the Description most wanted to capture, the Egypt that could be claimed and taken home and mathematically and rigorously interpreted in the silence of French laboratories and museums without the difficult complications associated with colonialism, subject peoples and the bizarteries of other cultures.

The cartographic representation of Egypt, in text, image and map, created an Egypt, an invented Egypt, perfectly packaged for European consumption. In a sense, the inscrutability of Egyptian hieroglyphics and the deliberate exclusion of the old enemy, Islam and Islamic culture, left a convenient space to fill Egypt with France. This image could then be re-exported home as proof of France’s fundamental tie to the classical, the universal, the monumental and, by implication, the eternally true and right.

Conclusion

Topographic maps have a remarkable appeal, even today. The way in which, analytically, they break down the structure of landscape for us often allows them to replace the countryside itself in our understanding of space — or at least in our attempts to plan it. Topographic maps still seem somehow to provide something more true and pure than what we are able to perceive of the landscape when we are in the midst of it. Indeed, they seem to promise to rescue us from the chaos and confusion of nature itself. We, however, live in an age which, even as it plans and rationalizes, craves the mystical, the unplanned, the unexpected and the exotic. Today, the scientific-looking depictions of Egypt to be found in the Description appeal less than Denon’s more romantic, artistic sketches of everyday life amidst the ruins of Egypt. We have grown suspicious of representations and their claims to truth or even understanding. We are, however, no less susceptible to the seduction of invention than we once were. The nature of the seduction to which we are immediately susceptible today is simply different. We remain somewhat responsive even to the seduction of past inventions, or to the remnants of their ideology and understanding, through our respect for academic authority, or through our cultural propensity to intellectual reliance on the
work and understanding of the past. Indeed, we may be all the more vulnerable to them precisely because, in their present shattered state, it is too easy to miss the systematic nature of these older inventions. We look at the Description with a secret admiration, no matter how critical our intellectual approach to it. It must have had an extraordinarily powerful resonance in an age obsessed with number, relative position, astronomical universality and intellectual unity and so recently and joyfully convinced of its ability to control and shape the world. The Description de l'Egypte which can be read as an enormous discourse built around the topographic mapping of Egypt and as an integrated and multimedia 'text', emanates from this age and reflects it with a startling clarity.

It would be wrong to claim, as the arguments of some post-modernists would seem to suggest, that the Description does not represent Egypt. It does. It does so, however, through a screen of purpose and perception which, if not understood, warps the image, making it dangerous for uncritical use. Certainly, it cannot be regarded in any sense as 'truth'. The Description de l'Egypte, like so many imperialist productions, is generally used and understood uncritically. The temptation to swallow the ideology with the reality is overwhelming and perhaps finally impossible to resist in the case of this magnificent and ultimately totally seductive picture of our own culture and technological preoccupations. That it has coloured our perceptions of other peoples, their culture and their history beyond redemption is something for which we, and sadly they, will pay in all of our interactions. Yet what can we do? We can expect inventions created outside the context of imperial aggression to be less profoundly destructive of the 'other'. However, we can also always expect our inventions to be fundamentally self-serving (the definition of self being historically and socially contingent). In addition, are we beings that can ever really cope with 'truth'? We seem to need fantasy and invention to interpret the world to ourselves and to give ourselves a place and a meaning in space and time. However oppressive and misguided, the Description de l'Egypte is a remarkable picture of a people's image of its place in history and in nature. It is also a picture that has had an impact on those it sought to represent. That, however, is an issue best explored within Arabic traditions of scholarship.

Acknowledgements

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Notes


3. The Description de l'Egypte was a product of the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt from 1798 to 1801. The invasion, ostensibly undertaken to protect French commercial interests in Egypt, was an attempt to outmanoeuvre British geostrategy in the Near and Far East. In partial imitation of the imperial conquests of Alexander the Great, Napoleon arranged to have approximately 150 scholars accompany the expedition, directed them to construct an Academy of Sciences modelled on the French Academy and ordered them to conduct exploration and research under both civilian and military auspices. The invasion was a military and diplomatic failure but its intellectual impact, in the form of the 22-volume Description de l'Egypte published between 1809 and 1822, was considerable

4. There is considerable debate in history, the philosophy and epistemology of science and social theory about the existence and nature of an 'Enlightenment Project'. At the heart of the debate lie fundamental views about the role of Enlightenment thought in the construction of both modernity and international European intellectual hegemony


7. Horkheimer and Adorno Dialectic of Enlightenment op. cit. 7

8. Harvey The condition of postmodernity op. cit. 27; Horkheimer and Adorno Dialectic of Enlightenment op. cit. 35

9. Habermas Modernity: an incomplete project op. cit. 5


11. Horkheimer and Adorno Dialectic of Enlightenment op. cit. xiv

12. Laurens et al. L'Expidition d'Egypte, 1798–1801 op. cit. 17

13. Harley Deconstructing the map op. cit; Wood What makes a map? op. cit.

14. Horkheimer and Adorno Dialectic of Enlightenment op. cit. 121

15. Munier H 1943 Tables de la 'Description de l'Egypte' suivies d'une bibliographie sur l'expédition française de Bonaparte Société Royale de Géographie d'Egypte, Cairo, is an invaluable summary and explanation of the structure, composition and detailed publication chronology of both editions of the Description.

16. Such issues have not gone entirely without notice. In particular, see Laurens et al L'Expidition d'Egypte, 1798–1801 op. cit. 329–31

17. Fourier J B 1809 Préface historique, Description de l'Egypte Imprimerie impériale, Paris

18. Ibid. iii, v

19. Ibid. xxxi, xxxiv

20. Ibid. i

21. Ibid. xcv

22. Ibid. vi–vi

23. Ibid. xxxi


25. Fourier Préface op. cit. xiv, xv

26. Ibid. li

27. Ibid. xxxvii

28. Ibid. vii

29. Ibid. lxxix

30. Ibid. lxxx

31. Bruno Latour describes this musification of the geography, art and history of others as a fundamental structural element of Western science. He thus sees science and imperialism as interdependent in the profoundest sense. For a refreshingly thoughtful view of the dialogue between the European and the 'savage' mind, see Latour B 1987 Centres of calculation in Science in action. How to follow scientists and engineers through society Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 215–57

32. Fourier Préface op. cit. 1

33. Ibid. xxxvi

34. Ibid. xix

35. Ibid. viii

36. Ibid. viii

37. Traunecker C 1989 L'Egypte antique de la Description in Laurens H et al L'Expidition d'Egypte op. cit. 351–70

38. I have discussed this in detail in Godlewska A 1988 The Napoleonic survey of Egypt. A masterpiece of cartographic compilation and early nineteenth-century fieldwork 25(1 and 2) Monograph 38–9

39. This was certainly true, for example, of Girard M P S 1812 Mémoire sur l'agriculture, l'industrie et le commerce de l'Egypte Description de l'Egypte EM 2(1) 491–714

40. See Jomard E F 1818 Description des antiquités de l'Heptanomide Description de l'Egypte AD 2 1–77

41. Jomard E F 1818 Mémoire sur la population comparée de l'Egypte ancienne et moderne Description de l'Egypte AM 2 88; and Jomard E F 1809 Description de Syene et des cataractes Description de l'Egypte AD 1 13

42. Girard P S 1809 Mémoire sur les mesures agraires des anciens Egyptiens Description de l'Egypte AM 1 326

43. Villoteau G-A 1809 Dissertation sur les diverses espèces d'instruments de musique que l'on remarque parmi les sculptures qui décorent les antiques monuments de l'Egypte, et sur les noms que leur donnerent, en leur langue propre, les premiers peuples de ce pays Description de l'Egypte AM 1 181

44. Villoteau G-A 1809 Mémoire sur la musique de l'antique Egypte Description de l'Egypte AM 1 359, 394 ff

45. Ibid. 425

46. See Jomard E F 1818 Remarques sur les signes numériques des anciens Egyptiens, fragment d'un ouvrage ayant pour titre: observations et recherches nouvelles sur les hiéroglyphes, accompagnées d'un tableau méthodique des signes Description de l'Egypte AM 2 57–70; and Jomard E F 1818 Mémoire sur les inscriptions anciennes recueillies en Egypte Description de l'Egypte AM 2 87–88

47. Jomard E F 1809 Mémoire sur le système métrique des anciens Egyptiens contenant des recherches sur leurs connaissances géométriques et sur les mesures des autres peuples de l'antiquité Description de l'Egypte AM 1 778

48. De Rozière M 1812 Discours sur le représentation des roches de l'Egypte et de l'Arabie par las gravure, et son utilité dans les arts et dans la géologie Description de l'Egypte HN 2 41–8
49. Desgenettes R 1798 Lettre circulaire aux médecins de l'armée d'Orient sur un plan propre à rédiger la topographie physique et médicale de l'Égypte La décade égyptienne 1 29–33. In fact, this concept of topographical mapping of disease had a great deal to do with the pre-germ conception of disease as caused by unhealthy environments. For more on this see Rofort M F 1987 Les topographies médicales; une géographie des maladies et de la santé aux XVIIe et XIXe siècles Thèse en géographie, Université de Paris VII; Rofort M F 1988 Les topographies médicales aux XVIIe et XIXe siècles Cahiers de Géographie 1 Montpellier; and Rofort M F and Besancenot J P 1991 Aux sources de la géographie de la santé: les topographies médicales en France aux XVIIe et XIXe siècles Geographica Medica 21 7–14.

50. On the image, map and text on a continuum from maximum density to maximum articulation and differentiation, see Mitchell W J T 1985 Iconology: image, text, ideology University of Chicago Press, Chicago 66–70; and Goodman N 1976 Languages of art Hackett, Indianapolis.


52. Echoes of this are to be found sprinkled throughout the journal which was the mouthpiece for the geographic engineers, the 1831 Mémorial du Déput de la Guerre Vol 2, 1803, 1805 and 1810 Ch Picquet, Paris. A direct reference to the possibilities offered by linking map and landscape painting is to be found on page iii of the 1831 Preface to the Mémorial. Cursory examination of the papers of military cartographers such as Joseph François Marie Martinet, a Napoléonie cartographer working in Italy, reveals that individuals sought to test these ideas in their work. Further, Giuseppe Bagetti's artistic and literary opus can be seen as an exploration of the possibilities offered by mixing map and image. Cf. note 86.


55. Other good examples of this include plate 103 in volume 2 of the 'État moderne' series providing a map, two views and sketches of some of the outstanding architecture of the area of Aswan and Isna (Esne).


57. Plate 39 in volume 1 of the 'Antiquités' series by Jollois and Devilliers: 'Plan général des ruines et des environs' of Ombos (Koum-Ombôù).

58. Girard Mémoire sur l'agriculture, l'industrie et le commerce de l'Égypte op. cit. 491–714.


61. Le Pére J M 1809 Mémoire sur la communication de la Mer des Indes à la Méditerranée par la Mer rouge et l'isthme de Soueys Description de l'Égypte EM I 21–186.


64. Lists of works in the library of the expedition and of books sent to Egypt in the course of the expedition are to be found in F17, 1100, dossier 1, document 48; and dossier 2, documents 153, 155, 166 and 170 at the Archives nationales, Paris.

65. See Mémoires sur l'Égypte et les Indes 2 vols MR 1677 Service historique de l'armée de terre, Vincennes.

66. These dialogues with d'Anville are too numerous to cite. In some of the scholarly discussions which pit d'Anville's maps and authority against the mapping efforts of the expedition members, Egypt itself almost seems to disappear. Thus, Du Bois-Aymé comments: 'I like to think, and my pride no doubt leads me to this, that if d'Anville had had a map as accurate as the one we have recently measured in Egypt at his disposal, his opinion on the branches of the Nile would have been that which I am going to present here': Du Bois-Aymé 1809 Mémoire sur les anciennes branches du Nil et ses embouchures dans la mer Description de l'Égypte AM 1 278. Note the construction; to understand as we understand, d'Anville needed to see our map – not d'Anville needed to see Egypt. The point is subtle but significant. For a discussion of d'Anville's importance to the expedition see Godlewska The Napoléonie survey of Egypt op. cit.
68. Jonard Mémoire sur la population comparée de l'Egypte ancienne et moderne op. cit.
69. Mitchell Colonising Egypt op. cit. xi
70. Anon. 1803 Procès-verbal des conférences de la commission charge par les différents services public intéressés à la perfection de la topographie, de simplifier et de rendre uniformes les signes et les conventions en usage dans les cartes, les plans et les dessins topographiques in Mémorial topographique et militaire 5 (September)
71. On the cadastre see Napoleon's letter to Kleber in Anon. 1798–1800 Copies of original letters from the army of General Bonaparte in Egypt, intercepted by the fleet under the command of Admiral Lord Nelson (6th edn) J Wright, London part 3 11; manuscripts at the Bibliothèque nationale: Ms Français No. 11275, documents 90–101; and manuscripts at the Archives nationales: F17A, 1100, dossier 1, document 4
72. The original manuscript maps and a few surveyors' notebooks survive and can be consulted at the Service historique de l'armée de terre, Vincennes. Godlewska The Napoleonic Survey of Egypt op. cit. is an analysis of these maps
73. Volney C-F C 1794–95 Simplification des langues orientales ou méthode nouvelle et facile d'apprendre les langues arabes, persannes et turques avec des caracteres europiennes Paris
74. Ibid. 3
75. Volney C-F C 1826 L’Alphabet européen appliqué au langes asiatiques 2nd edn Paris xvi
76. Jonard E F 1818 Mémoire sur la population comparée moderne Description de l’Egypte AM 2 92–4
77. Volney 1826 L’Alphabet européen appliqué au langes asiatiques op. cit. x
80. See the ‘Antiquités’ plates, volume 1, legend for plate 17
81. Académie de France à Rome 1978 Piranesi et les Français Edizioni dell’Elefante, Rome
83. See the ‘Etat moderne’ plates, volume 2, Arts et métiers, plates 1–33 and A–NN
84. In particular, see volume 1 of the ‘Etat moderne’ plates, plate 26: Le Kaïre, plan particulier de la ville. Here, as in Figure 4, although the focus is on modern Cairo, much of the city is simply blocked out. Indeed, the map is utterly illegible without good lighting, a magnifying glass and painful and persistent comparison with an extensive legend published elsewhere in the Description
85. One of the best examples of this is ‘Antiquités’, volume 1, plate 51. Thebes, Karnak: ‘Elevation perspective de la porte du sud’ – which title makes no reference to the depiction of an ancient Egyptian procession (of indeterminate date and meaning) through the gates
86. Bagetti G P or Bagetti J-P 1764–1831 author of 1827 Analisi della unità d’effetto nella pittura e della imitazione nelle belle arti Turin. Although I have been unable to locate or to see this particular painting, according to contemporary accounts, Bagetti’s most lauded work, and the culmination of his Napoleonic career was a ‘Panoramic view of Italy’. In it he combined cartographic and panoramic depiction to arrive at a view of Italy spanning from the Alps to Naples as it would be seen (as though it could be seen) from the Alps
87. Mitchell Colonising Egypt op. cit. 12

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